

Kingship and Procreation in a Pyu Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin Stone Relief from Śrīkṣetra

သရေခေတ္တရာရှိ ဗိဿနိုး အနန္တသာရင် ကျောက်စစ်ရုပ်တု၏ မင်းရိုက်ရာ နှင့် စည်ပင်ပြန့်ပွားခြင်း

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Abstract: This paper examines closely a stone relief carving found in 1919 at the Pyu city of Śrīkṣetra in Myanmar, which appears to be an unusual variant of the Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin iconographic type — the lotus stem germinating from the reclining Viṣṇu’s navel sprouts not one, but three lotus seats, with a recursion of Viṣṇu now flanked by Brahmā on the right and Śiva on the left. Only six images depicting this iconographic variant of Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin have been found in Myanmar. Taking to heart Elizabeth Moore’s calls to complicate the “ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of ‘Pyu culture’ [which] has become entrenched in Burmese archaeology,” this paper seeks to suggest alternative ways of thinking about such Pyu art. It considers the apparent reinterpretation of Viṣṇu’s Creator-function in this particular Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin image in relation to his possible cadastral functions, to the Bagan king Kyanzittha’s conceptions of kingship which are clearly linked to the foundation of Śrīkṣetra, and to Buddhist lineages as reflected in, for example, the succession of the four Buddhas of the Past.

Keywords: Bagan, Bodhisatta, fecundity, kingship, Kyanzittha, lineage, Pyu, Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin

စာတမ်းအကျဉ်း - အထက်ပါစာတမ်းသည် ၁၉၁၉ခုနှစ် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ သရေခေတ္တရာမြို့တွင် တွေ့ရှိခဲ့သော ကျောက်စစ် ရုပ်တုအား အသေးစိတ် လေ့လာစမ်းစစ် တင်ပြသွားမည်ဖြစ်ပါသည်။ အဆိုပါ ကျောက်စစ်ရုပ်သည် ဗိဿနိုး အနန္တသာရင် ရုပ်တုများတွင် တစ်မူ ထူးခြားကွဲပြားသည့် လက္ခဏာ ရှိသည်။ လှေလျောင်းနေသော ဗိဿနိုးနတ်မင်း၏ ချက်တော်မှ ကြာသုံးခိုင် ထွက်ပေါ်လာပြီးနောက် လည်းကောင်း အလယ်ကြာ ပုလ္လင်ထက်တွင် ဗိဿနိုးနတ်မင်းအား ညာဘက်တွင် သီဝနတ်မင်းနှင့် ညာဘက်တွင် ဗြဟ္မာ တို့အားခြံရံလျက် တွေ့ရပါသည်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ထိုကဲ့သို့ သောလက်ရာရှိသည့် ဗိဿနိုးရုပ်တုမှာ ခြောက်ခုသာလျှင်တွေ့ရှိရပါသည်။ Elizabeth Moore ၏ မြန်မာ့ရှေးဟောင်း သုတေသနရပ်ဝန်းတွင် စတင် အမြစ်တွယ်နေသည့် ပျူယဉ်ကျေးမှု၏ မျိုးနွယ်စု နှင့်ဘာသာဗေဒ တူညီခြင်း က ပိုမိုရှုပ်ထွေး စေသည့် အဆိုအရ ယခုစာတမ်းသည် အဆိုပါပျူ အနုပညာလက်ရာအား အမြင်သစ်များ ဖြင့် ကြိုးပမ်းတင်ပြသွားပါမည်။ သရေခေတ္တရာတည်ထောင်သည့် ဒဏ္ဍာရီ နှင့် ပွင့်ခဲ့သော ဘုရားလေးဆူ၏ အမွေကိုဆက်ခံလျက် ဗုဒ္ဓမျိုးနွယ်မှဆင်းသက်လာသည်ဟူသည့် အယူအဆများနှင့် သိသာစွာ ဆက်စပ်လျက်ရှိသည့် ပုဂံခေတ်ကျန်စစ်သားမင်း ဘုရင့်ရိုက်ရာ ခံယူချက်သဘောတရားသည် ယင်း ရုပ်တုအား အဓိပ္ပါယ် ပြန်လည် ဖွင့်ဆိုရာတွင် ဖန်းဆင်းရှင်ဗိဿနိုးနတ်မင်း ၏ တန်ခိုးအာဏာ နှင့်ဆက်စပ်နေနိုင်သည် ကို စဉ်းစားချင့်ချိန်လျက် တင်ပြသွားပါမည်။

အဓိကစကားလုံးများ- ပုဂံ၊ ဗောဓိဿတ၊ စည်ပင်ဖွံ့ဖြိုးခြင်း၊ မင်းရိုက်ရာ၊ ကျန်စစ်သား၊ မျိုးနွယ်၊ ပျူ၊ ဗိဿနိုး အနန္တသာရင်

Introduction

On a visit to Prome (now Pyay, Myanmar) in January 1919, the Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey of Burma, Charles Duroiselle, was led to a lizard hole at Kalagangon village, southeast of the ruins of the Pyu city of Śrīkṣetra, which harboured two stone images of the god Viṣṇu. He reported that a hunter “was giving chase to an iguana, which disappeared in a hole; [he] enlarged the aperture, and a few inches below the surface found a standing Viṣṇu; close to it was found the other, Viṣṇu on the serpent Ananta.” Curiously, the lotus stem germinating from the reclining Viṣṇu’s navel sprouted not one, but three lotus seats (Figure 1). On the central seat was Viṣṇu again, though now seated with four arms, with three-headed Brahmā on his right and Śiva on the left.

Duroiselle observed at the time that this Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin did not conform to Hindu iconographic types then known from modern compilations of Sanskrit manuscripts like Gopinatha Rao’s *Elements of Hindu Iconography*.¹ He also indicated its resemblance to two Vaiṣṇava images carved in red sandstone which had been found in Thaton, Mon state, before 1893 (Figures 2 & 3). These had been identified by the “capable Hindu scholar” Pandit Hari Mohan Vidyabhushan as Viṣṇu “represented in human form slumbering on the serpent Śēsha, and floating on the waters before the creation of the world,” where “from the lotus of his navel spring the three gods of the Hindu triad.”² Another reclining Viṣṇu of this type was later found in 1958 by G. H. Luce and U Ba Shin at the Kawgun caves in Kayin state (Figure 4).³

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¹ DUROISELLE, *Report of the Superintendent*, 22–23. He consulted the iconographic compilations of three contemporary scholars: the Pandit B. B. Bidyabinod, Krishna Sastri, and Gopinatha Rao.

² TEMPLE, “Notes on Antiquities in Ramannadesa,” 359. These two slabs were moved to the Payre Museum in Rangoon, and then to the Rangoon University Library, where they were badly damaged in April 1945 by the Japanese in their withdrawal from the city during the Second World War (see LUCE, *Old Burma–Early Pagán*, 214). TEMPLE acknowledged (357) that, while these sculpted stones found in Thaton were “*prima facie* Hindu, and Vaiṣṇava or Śaiva in type, according to the reading of the symbols carved on them,” they were likely to be syncretic in nature, pointing to “how much Tantrik Hinduism and Buddhism are mixed up in Buddhist sculpture in Gaya itself.”

³ As described in LUCE, *Old Burma–Early Pagán*, 218. The relevant report, in Burmese, is by Aung Thaw in the *Report of the Director*,

Two more were also found, the first in a fragmentary state by Duroiselle in 1913 (Figure 5)⁴ and the second most likely in the 1960s (Figure 6),⁵ in the Bagan temples 1600 and 1612 respectively, which are considered to date to the 11th and 12th centuries.

Precious little has been written about these six Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin images found in Myanmar with a tri-stemmed navel, a feature which differentiates the type not only from known Indian representations of this form of Viṣṇu,⁶ but also from contemporary Khmer and Cham examples. If the birth of the creator-god Brahmā is emblematic of the Purāṇic conception of Viṣṇu creating the Universe, what happens when Brahmā is displaced by a recursion, a likeness of the progenitor Viṣṇu? Perhaps in considering this question, we displace the Purāṇic Viṣṇu itself, and thereby the standard Vaiṣṇava iconographic types of the Indian pandits, from their place of hermeneutic primacy. Pamela Gutman remarked on the Kawgun image that “whether the positioning on this, and the other depictions of Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin at Thaton, Śrīkṣetra and Pagan, means that in Burma the role of Viṣṇu as Creator was reinterpreted or misunderstood cannot be explained.”⁷ In this essay, I gesture towards such an explanation, building on many of Gutman’s observations, though cautious of the fact that the six images under review are now in a fragmentary state, or even completely lost to us. Indeed, the coils of the serpent Ananta on the Śrīkṣetra image, if they were ever there as Duroiselle claimed, are almost completely effaced.

The Pyu and Bagan Kingship

The Śrīkṣetra image was dated by Duroiselle at the time of discovery to the 8th or 9th century, or earlier, almost certainly to position it in the period when rulers with a dynastic name suffixed -vikrama were speculated to have ruled at Śrīkṣetra. Luce, follow-

Archaeological Survey, Burma, for the year ending 1958. Also see GUTMAN, “Religious Syncretism in 11th-century Thaton.”

⁴ LUCE, *Old Burma–Early Pagán*, 219, on temple 1600: “Col. Ba Shin...is certainly right in concluding that the main image in the temple was yet another Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin, in the act of creation (or rather re-creation) of the universe; that the main image of the god, sleeping on the Ananta serpent with his head to the left, is now lost owing to treasure-hunters.” See DUROISELLE, “The Nat-hlaung-kyau,” for the report. See also PICHARD, *Inventory of Monuments at Pagan*, 236–39; STADTNER, *Ancient Pagan*, 142–45; STRACHAN, *Imperial Pagan*, 39–41.

⁵ In *Phases of Pre-Pagán Burma*, 60 (n. 75), which was based on lectures delivered in Paris in 1966, LUCE writes “a new specimen from Pagán has also been reported,” which must refer to the one found in temple 1612. See also STADTNER, *Ancient Pagan*, 145.

⁶ With the exception of one bronze image from Southeast Bengal; see BAUTZE-PICRON, “The ‘Viṣṇu-Lokeśvara’ Images from Bengal,” 148 & 166 (fig. 10).

⁷ GUTMAN, “Religious Syncretism in 11th-century Thaton,” 138.



Figure 1. Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin. 6th–9th century or later. Stone, 38 x 36 x 10 cm. Found in the hole of a monitor lizard at Kalagangon Village, Śrīkṣetra, Myanmar in 1919. Lower section now missing. Sri Ksetra Museum, 2013/1/37. Left: Photograph by G. H. Luce, 1919–1958 © National Library of Australia, P516/50. Right: Recent view of the same object. Photograph © Donald Stadtner, 2013.

ing Duroiselle, also regarded this type as part of the Pyu, or more specifically Śrīkṣetra, cultural sphere.⁸ In 1911–12, Duroiselle himself had excavated the four monumental stone urns inscribed with the names and death dates of Sūriyavikrama (d. 688) and an unnamed relative of his (d. 673), as well as Harivikrama (d. 695) and Sīhavigrama (d. 718).⁹ The Vaiṣṇava connotations of “Vikrama,” it being one of the 1,000 names of Viṣṇu cited in the *Mahābhārata*, have been used in tandem with Viṣṇu images found at Śrīkṣetra to indicate “the close identification of ruling elites with Viṣṇu,” even very recently.¹⁰ However, although the use of Viṣṇu’s footprints as symbols of royal authority is attested in the earliest epigraphy of Java and the Mekong delta,¹¹ no such record exists for Pyu settlements — this may change when the corpus of Pyu inscriptions is deciphered.¹² The nature of Pyu kingship, and indeed whether “Pyu culture” can truly be characterised in terms of dynastic, ethnic or even linguistic homogeneity,¹³ is still a matter up for debate.

⁸ LUCE, *Phases of Pre-Pagán Burma*, 55–56.

⁹ See DUROISELLE, “Excavations at Hmawza.” The inscriptions were translated in 1917 by C. O. Blagden.

¹⁰ GUY, *Lost Kingdoms*, 77.

¹¹ As discussed in LAVY, “As in Heaven, So on Earth,” 23–27.

¹² For the latest on the Pyu inscriptions, see GRIFFITHS et al., “Studies in Pyu Epigraphy, I.”

¹³ See Elizabeth MOORE’s critique of this in “Place and Space in Early Burma,” especially her conclusion, 115–16.

It may be productive, then, to examine this image looking retrospectively from the standpoint of the Bagan kings. Out of the six Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin reliefs under review, three usually dated to the 9th–11th centuries were from Mon territories incorporated into the Bagan empire,¹⁴ and the last two were found in Bagan temples dated to around the period of Kyanzittha’s reign. The *Man shu* 蠻書 (*Book of the Southern Barbarians*), a 9th-century Chinese text, records that “in 832 Man [Nanzhao] rebels plundered the Piao [Pyu] kingdom,”¹⁵ and this is sometimes taken to mark the decline of the Pyu in the region in favour of the Burmese. However, much building activity was conducted at Śrīkṣetra under the auspices of the Bagan kings till at least the 13th century, indicating the possibility of a shared vocabulary of forms.¹⁶ My point here is that it is necessary to consider how this unusual Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin type might trespass on the typological boundaries neatly separating Pyu and Mon from Bagan or Burmese.

Furthermore, elements of Pyu kingship seem to survive in some strata of the Bagan epigraphic record, as suggested by the continued importance

¹⁴ RAY, *Brahmanical Gods in Burma*, 89, dated them to the 9th century; Gutman preferred the 11th century (see STADTNER, “The Mon of Lower Burma,” 204).

¹⁵ As translated in WADE, “Beyond the Southern Borders,” 28.

¹⁶ HUDSON and LUSTIG, “Communities of the Past,” 277–81. On this topic, see also GUTMAN and HUDSON, “Pyu Stucco at Pagan.”



Figure 2. Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin. 9th–10th century or later. Stone, 107 x 56 cm. Found in Thaton, Mon state, southern Myanmar before 1893. Photograph by G. H. Luce, 1919–1958 © National Library of Australia, P516/89.



Figure 3. Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin. 9th–10th century or later. Stone, 137 x 91 cm. Found in Thaton, Mon state, southern Myanmar before 1893. Photograph by G. H. Luce, 1919–1958 © National Library of Australia, P516/90.



Figure 4. Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin. ca. 11th century. Stone, 137 x 84 x 18 cm. Kawgun cave, Kayin (Karen) state, Myanmar. Photograph © Donald Stadtner, 2013.



Figure 6. Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin. ca. 12th century. Height 81 cm. Found in Pichard no. 1612. Bagan Archaeological Museum. Photograph © Donald Stadtner, 2013.



Figure 5. Central niche of the Nat-hlaung-kyauṅ Temple, Bagan (Pichard no. 1600). ca. 11th century. Width 2.6 m. The image here may have been removed by German geologist and palaeontologist Friedrich Wilhelm Nötling; present location unknown. Left: Photograph © École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Pierre Pichard, ref. EFEO_PICP13610. Right: Modern restoration in stucco, in the same niche. Photographed in 2016 by Conan Cheong ([CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)).

of the city of Śrīkṣetra in royal self-imaging. Many scholars have written about the Vaiṣṇavite elements in the Mon-language lithic inscriptions of king Kyanzittha (r. 1084–1111),¹⁷ which represent the earliest extant rhetorical formulations of Burmese kingship. What I would like to stress here, however, is the decisive act undertaken by the king, in his past life as Viṣṇu empowered by the Buddha, of founding the city of Śrīkṣetra — this ritual action is as intertwined with his royal legitimacy as is his claim to be a reincarnation of Viṣṇu. In the Shwezigon Pagoda inscription, the Buddha predicts that:

“Ānan, hereafter a sage named Bisnū [Viṣṇu], great in supernatural power, great in glory, possessing the five transcendental faculties, together with my son Gawarṃpati, and King In, and Bisukarmmadewaput, and Katakarmmanāgarāja, shall build a city called Sisīt [Śrīkṣetra]. After that, the sage Bisnū, departing from thence,

shall go up to Brahmaloḥ; (and) departing from Brahmaloḥ, shall come to be in the city of Ari-maddanapūr [Bagan], (and) shall bear the name of King Śrī Tribhuwanādityadhammarāja, (and) shall uphold my religion.”¹⁸

The Sanskrit-Pāli epithet Tribhuwanādityadhammarāja, which Luce translates as “‘Fortunate Buddhist king, Sun of the Three Worlds’ (of men, devas, and brahmās),” was first used by Kyanzittha and later adopted by many of his successors.¹⁹ It is clear that Kyanzittha’s own conception of kingship, which incorporated the god Viṣṇu and the foundation of the Pyu city of Śrīkṣetra, remained important for subsequent kings in Myanmar.

Gods of the Soil

The Bengali historian Nihar-Ranjan Ray, whose 1932 monograph *Brahmanical Gods in Burma* was the first

¹⁷ RAY, *Brahmanical Gods in Burma*, 18–22. Also noted by LUCE, *Old Burma—Early Pagán*, 205. Also see DESHPANDE and GUTMAN, “The Viṣṇu on Garuḍa from the Nat Hlaung Kyaung Temple,” 80–82, and GUTMAN, “Religious Syncretism in 11th-century Thaton,” 136.

¹⁸ BLAGDEN, “Môn Inscriptions,” 114.

¹⁹ LUCE, *Old Burma—Early Pagán*, 53.

to try and evaluate holistically the influence of Hinduism (or, as was current, “Brahmanism”) in pre-modern Burma, regarded it as distinct from, and even antithetical to, the predominant doctrine of “Hinayana Buddhism.” In this, he was consistent with the prevailing theory of Indianisation then used to explain the spread of “Brahmanical culture” in Southeast Asia that would later take shape in George Coedès’s *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, published in 1944.²⁰ Ray therefore framed the question in terms of a zero-sum competition between Brahmanism and Buddhism:

“[Hīnayāna Buddhism] was definitely opposed to the very idea of gods and goddesses...in Burma it tolerated Brahmanical rituals and ceremonials presided over by *Brāhmaṇa* priests, but never allowed Brahmanical gods to trespass within its own sacred precincts. Burma was not thus a congenial soil for the propagation of the Brahmanical faith. One indirect result was that there were no new converts into Brahmanism, so that the Brahmanical population remained a separate and isolated community from the very beginning, and was tolerated as such by the much more numerous Buddhist population.”²¹

Ray went as far as to consider the aforementioned Vikramas as an “Indian dynasty of kings” which “dominated” Pyu-period Burma, and that “it was most probably under the aegis of this dynasty that Brahmanism made its mark in Lower Burma.”²² In keeping with this clear division between Indian-Brahmanical and local-Buddhist, Ray conjectured that it was “colonial artists” — by which he meant artists of Indian descent who had travelled to work in the Sanskritised “colony” of Burma — and not “local Burman craftsmen” who had made the tri-stemmed Viṣṇu Anantaśāyīn image, and that furthermore they “either followed a text which is yet unknown to us or that they misinterpreted the whole story as known in India.”²³

At around the same time, Paul Mus published his 1933 essay *India Seen from the East* where, subvert-

²⁰ Compare RAY’s view (*Brahmanical Gods in Burma*, 4–5) that “we know that in South-east Asia almost all the countries that had been colonized by Indians or had close commercial contact with India were permeated with Brahmanical culture and its elaborate paraphernalia of rites and rituals, gods and goddesses, and myths and legends,” with COEDÈS’s definition of Indianisation (*Indianized States*, 15–16) as “the expansion of an organized culture that was founded upon the Indian conception of royalty, was characterized by Hinduist or Buddhist cults, the mythology of the *Purāṇas*, and the observance of the *Dharmaśāstras*, and expressed itself in the Sanskrit language.”

²¹ RAY, *Brahmanical Gods in Burma*, 11–12.

²² RAY, 83.

²³ RAY, 29–30. He refers specifically to the three Viṣṇu Anantaśāyīn known at the time, the one found at Śrīkṣetra and the two red sandstone ones found in Thaton. Of course, “Burman” is an anachronism in this case.



Figure 7. *Liṅga-yoni* ensemble. ca. 9th century. Sandstone, *liṅga*: 41 x 15.5 cm, *yoni*: 52 x 41 x 11 cm. Possibly Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Asian Civilisations Museum, 1998-01384. Photograph © Asian Civilisations Museum.

ing the paradigm exemplified by Ray’s conception of Burmese “soil” as the passive recipient for Indian Brahmanical (or, alternatively, Indian Buddhist) implantation, he sought to “look beyond the great religions of Asia and reconstruct a style of collective belief in which the true god of the soil was a place.”²⁴ Drawing examples from Champa, Mus used the Śaivite *liṅga* to illustrate how this Hindu (or Vedic) element became “the successor of the crude stone of the cults of the soil”²⁵ in functioning as an intermediary which allowed the king (or chief, or priest) to actualise control over the land. Ashley Thompson, in her reading of Mus, further emphasises the “interposition” that occurs in the “*liṅga-yoni* ensemble,” where the *yoni* is not merely the female counterpart to the *liṅga*, but is representative of the “great Earth” itself, the “absolutely unlimited which allows the delimitation of that which takes shape, form, definition.”²⁶ In sculptural terms, the *yoni* as a pedestal transforms the implanted *liṅga* into an artwork (Figure 7).

²⁴ Mus, *India Seen from the East*, 25. As Ashley THOMPSON notes, Mus was ahead of his time in how he “called into question...the elite epigraphic record and the scholarly work which, together, had established the paradigm of a one-way civilizational flow from West to East” (*Engendering the Buddhist State*, 71).

²⁵ Mus, *India Seen from the East*, 45–46.

²⁶ THOMPSON, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, 80–82.



Figure 8. Double-sided stele. 4th–6th century or earlier. Sandstone, 139.7 x 95 x 11.4 cm. Excavated to the northwest of palace complex, Śrīkṣetra. National Museum, Yangon, 1649. Left: Side carved with three male figures. Right: Other side, carved with what has been described as a *triratna* and an empty throne representing the Buddha's enlightenment. Installation views of exhibition "Buddhist Art of Myanmar" at Asia Society Museum, New York, 2015. Photographs © Heidi Tan, reproduced courtesy of National Museum, Yangon and Asia Society.

Gutman and Bob Hudson have already evoked Mus in their analysis of a 1.4 metre tall sandstone stele carved with possible Vaiṣṇava imagery on one side and Buddhist symbols on the other which was found in the remains of the palace complex in Śrīkṣetra (Figure 8), suggesting that it "continues an earlier tradition involving ancestor worship and the spirit of the soil."²⁷ They connect this stele to the "signs of a megalithic cult, doubtless older than Buddhism but mixed with it," which Luce saw in the Pyu cities of Śrīkṣetra and Halin.²⁸ Indeed, in Myanmar today, the disparate cults of the territorial spirits known as *nats* are still widely practiced.²⁹

In order to push against the outer limits of a text-centred approach in exploring all the possible implications of the iconography of the six pieces under review, I bring in literature for which there is no certainty that they were known in Pyu or Bagan period Myanmar. The Purāṇic texts, in particular, sometimes misused in an attempt to fix Southeast Asian iconographies into Indic boxes, are nevertheless

evoked here to try and obliquely access the autochthonous "substratum"³⁰ that Mus argued underlies both India and "monsoon Asia", calling to attention their resonance with texts and iconographies in Myanmar of that period. The mode of interpretation I suggest we take in examining the iconography of the tri-stemmed Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin will not go as far as to pronounce literal truth, and instead aims more to surface productive interconnections and interpositions with contiguous material, while remaining grounded in the historicisation of the structure and symbolism of this particular image type in Myanmar.

City Walls and Water

While the Śaivite *liṅga-yoni* is not found in Burma, the "immense question of inheritance, genealogy and linear descent," which Thompson observes in Mus's reading of the Cham *liṅga* cult,³¹ looms over this image. Several reliefs found in Śrīkṣetra pair the god Viṣṇu, sometimes riding a *garuḍa*, with a goddess

²⁷ GUTMAN and HUDSON, "A First-Century Stele from Sriksetra", 20–21. They date it to the very beginning of the 1st millennium, though most others date it to around the 4th–6th centuries (see GUY, *Lost Kingdoms*, 40–44).

²⁸ LUCE, *Phases of Pre-Pagán Burma*, 52.

²⁹ The classic text for *nat* worship is SPIRO, *Burmese Supernaturalism*; see especially 108–42.

³⁰ This term, used by Mus (*India Seen from the East*, 33), was also used by COEDÈS (*Indianized States*, 10), although the latter of course privileged the "Indian superstructure." Mus warned: "working at a great distance from the object of study, one sometimes risks confusing a library with a country" (*India Seen from the East*, 21).

³¹ THOMPSON, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, 81.



Figure 9. Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī. 7th–9th century. Stone, 94 x 63 x 11 cm. Found in the garden of the Deputy Commissioner of Prome. Sri Ksetra Museum, 2013/1/32. Photograph by G. H. Luce, 1919–1958 © National Library of Australia, P516/49a.

figure holding lotus buds who has been identified as his consort Lakṣmī (Figure 9).³² In the Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin under review, however, the female principle is not depicted — unlike some Indian and Khmer examples, Lakṣmī is not pictured massaging Viṣṇu's feet. Indeed, in the one found in the Kawgun caves, a four-armed Gaṇeśa takes the place of Lakṣmī.³³ Perhaps this evinces what Thompson calls the "male usurpation of the womb,"³⁴ where the supine Viṣṇu incorporates Lakṣmī's function to become an anthropomorphised *yoni* pedestal. She illustrates this idea with the version of the Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin story in the *Liṅga Purāṇa*, where it is Śiva who "deposits his semen in the *yoni* which is Viṣṇu," which then enables the germination of the lotus-throned Brahmā from the latter's navel.³⁵

If the reclining Viṣṇu is the *yoni*, the *liṅga* in this ensemble must be the unusual triad of Brahmā-Viṣṇu-

Śiva which displaces the usual Brahmā. Erected over a male form, it doubles as the god's tripartite phallus directed outwards, "an image of the god exercising dominion over the land."³⁶ The central seated Viṣṇu is holding, where visible in the six examples of the type, a *chakra*, mace (or ball), *vilva* fruit and conch shell in his four hands. Following the earlier reading of the Shwezigon inscription, the emanated Viṣṇu might be interpreted as an allusion to the king as the reincarnation of Viṣṇu. In the Vedas, the sacrificer is transformed into Viṣṇu through his ritual performance of the three famous steps taken by the god, such that "the sacrificer becoming Viṣṇu wins finally these worlds."³⁷ Here, Viṣṇu's *trivikrama* allegorises the annexation of land which is the result desired by the sacrificer, who can be imagined here to be the Burmese king, and who indeed boasts of his dominion over the Three Worlds (*tribhuvana*) with his regnal title. But Viṣṇu is also identified as the sacrifice itself, married to the goddess Aditi who personifies the "divine earth" — "the sacrifice went away from the gods in the form of Viṣṇu, and entered the earth."³⁸ The two iconographic forms of Viṣṇu in this relief therefore seem to differentiate the god-as-sacrifice from the god-as-sacrificer, the source of all things from the instrument which activates that source. In Mus's system, this is the distinction between a "personal intermediary" and "a specific collectivity that acquires its right to the land by means of this intermediary, through which it enters into communion with the impalpable chthonic Proteus in a living form."³⁹

In this context, it is significant that the foundation of cities and the demarcation of their boundaries, both of Śrīkṣetra and Bagan, is consistently described as the king's primary duty, only rivalled in importance by his duty to "uphold the religion of the Lord Buddha."⁴⁰ The same inscription proclaims that "as if fastened down with four stakes of iron, so shall King Tribhuwanādityadhammarāja make [Bagan] firm,"⁴¹ and describes various ways in which the king distinguishes the territory within the four corners of his claim from "other countries."⁴² As Moore observes, "massive walls made of large bricks"⁴³ 2–5 m wide are one of the benchmarks used by archaeologists today to define a Pyu settlement, like those enclosing

³⁶ THOMPSON, 100.

³⁷ *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 5.2.1.1; see KEITH, trans., *The Veda of the Black Yajus School*, 403. Also noted in GONDA, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, 77.

³⁸ *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 6.2.4.2; see KEITH, trans., *The Veda of the Black Yajus School*, 505. Also noted in GONDA, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, 115.

³⁹ Mus, *India Seen from the East*, 36.

⁴⁰ BLAGDEN, "Môn Inscriptions," 114–15.

⁴¹ BLAGDEN, 120.

⁴² BLAGDEN, 117.

⁴³ MOORE, "Place and Space in Early Burma," 108.

³² RAY, *Brahmanical Gods in Burma*, 25. Also see LUCE, *Old Burma—Early Pagán*, 216.

³³ As GUTMAN notices in "Religious Syncretism in 11th-century Thaton," 136.

³⁴ THOMPSON, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, 100.

³⁵ THOMPSON, 100.



Figure 10. Viṣṇu on *garuḍa*. 6th–9th century or later. Stone, 40 x 23 cm. Found in the hole of a monitor lizard at Kalagangon Village, Śrīkṣetra, Myanmar in 1919. Present location unknown. Photograph by G. H. Luce, 1919–1958 © National Library of Australia, P516/49b.

over 12 km² of territory at Śrīkṣetra.⁴⁴ It is tempting to connect this also with Indra's enigmatic request to a *nāga* king to "cause the whole realm of King Śrī Tribhuvanādityadhammarāja to be completely within an enclosure of well being, like rising saplings of trees,"⁴⁵ where arboreal growth is used as a metaphor for urban development.

Furthermore, these walls were integrated into Pyu irrigation and hydraulic systems. With annual rainfall too low to support rainfed rice agriculture,⁴⁶ the ability to store and drain floodwaters was essential to Pyu urban expansion in the central dry zone of the Ayeyarwady river valley. Janice Stargardt has written extensively about the "protracted, linked nature of wall, moat and tank building" at Śrīkṣetra, such that "the exigencies of water control originally determined the course of the walls."⁴⁷ It seems that the Pyu method of marking the territorial extent of a kingdom was indistinguishable from the technology

used to make that land fertile. Interestingly, this parallel between the cadastral and agricultural functions of kingship is discernible in Kyanzittha's inscriptions. Indra tells the sage Bisnū that in his future existence as Kyanzittha, "rain shall fall an hundred (and) twenty times, (and) all the sap of this great earth also shall come forth, all barns (and) granaries shall be full of all (manner of) goods."⁴⁸ Mirroring the manifestation of the particularised triad from the Viṣṇu-*yoni*, Kyanzittha's ability to draw out the "fecundity latent in the earth"⁴⁹ converts the "unlimited" earth into "delimited" earth which can then be used for agrarian purposes.

The lotus leaves ringing the three emanated deities as an extension of their thrones, also seen with a *garuḍa*-riding Viṣṇu (Figure 10) found in the Kalagangon lizard hole, further evokes the vegetative metaphor in the triad germinating from the reclining Viṣṇu. Ananda Coomaraswamy has written about how the lotus, growing pure from the waters, is symbolic of the Vedic "Tree of Life; this cosmic tree which sprang originally from the navel of Varuṇa, bearing the deities within its branches"⁵⁰ – a fecundity which ties in here with Viṣṇu's generative power. Interestingly, in another *garuḍa*-riding Viṣṇu, found in the Nat-hlaung-kyaung (Bagan monument 1600) and now in the State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia, Viṣṇu "sits in *padmāsana* on a lotus throne, identical to Buddha images" with *garuḍa* then supporting the lotus (Figure 11). This led Olga Deshpande and Gutman to speculate that "the sculptor was more familiar with Buddhist than Brahmanical art."⁵¹ I would like to suggest, however, that we do not rule out entirely the possibility of a conscious synthesis.

To elaborate on the relationship of Viṣṇu with Aditi, or more precisely, of the king with the earth,⁵² it is notable that Ronald Inden interprets the preliminary rite of a Hindu royal consecration (*abhiṣeka*) cere-

⁴⁴ GUTMAN and HUDSON, "The Archaeology of Burma," 161.

⁴⁵ BLAGDEN, "Môn Inscriptions," 125.

⁴⁶ The average annual rainfall Beikthano receives is 870 mm, while Śrīkṣetra receives 1200 mm (STARGARDT, "From the Iron Age to Early Cities," 345–46).

⁴⁷ STARGARDT, "From the Iron Age to Early Cities," 360–61.

⁴⁸ BLAGDEN, "Môn Inscriptions," 126–27. GUTMAN has noted in several articles the confluence between the duty of the *cakravartin* to "make rain and to cause the crops to thrive" and the functions "attributed to Viṣṇu, who is always concerned with stability, regeneration and fertility" (DESHPANDE and GUTMAN, "The Viṣṇu on Garuḍa from the Nat Hlaung Kyaung Temple," 80). See also GUTMAN, "Vishnu in Burma," 30, and "Religious Syncretism in 11th-century Thaton," 135–36.

⁴⁹ Mus, *India Seen from the East*, 25.

⁵⁰ COOMARASWAMY, *Yakṣas*, Part 2, 57. He was also aware of the "remarkable Burmese representations" where "the one stem rising from the navel of the recumbent Nārāyaṇa bears on three flowers the Trinity of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva" (*Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, 18) from Ray's writings, and connects them also to the lotus symbolism.

⁵¹ DESHPANDE and GUTMAN, "The Viṣṇu on Garuḍa from the Nat Hlaung Kyaung Temple," 75.

⁵² In GONDA's reading, the sacrificer's wife is initiated as Aditi in the Vedic sacrifice, while the king as sacrificer becomes Viṣṇu who is the consort of Aditi. In this sense, the matrimonial relationship of Viṣṇu with Aditi is that of the king with the Earth. See GONDA,



Figure 11. Viṣṇu on *garuḍa*. 11th–12th century. Grey sandstone, 114 x 47 x 33 cm. Found in the Nat-hlaung-kyau Temple, Bagan (Pichard no. 1600). State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. This statue was taken by Friedrich Wilhelm Nötling around 1895 to a museum in Berlin's Dahlem district. It was taken by the Russian army during the Second World War. Photograph provided to the author by Donald Stadtner, from a print furnished to him by the Museen Dahlem.

mony prescribed in the Purāṇas, where the king's body is "daubed" with "clays" from different parts of his kingdom, as effecting "a kind of extraordinary marriage of the king and the earth, his bride."⁵³

"Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View," 125–29.

⁵³ INDEN, "Ritual, Authority, and Cyclic Time in Hindu Kingship," 43–45.

Familial symbolism also characterises Bagan kingship where, as the beneficiaries of Kyanzitha's largesse, "all the people (shall be) like a child that is in (its) mother's bosom."⁵⁴ These themes come together in 18th-century Burmese historian U Kala's description of the coronation of the Toungoo king Thalun in 1633. It climaxed with the king "pouring the water of libation from a golden jar," presumably onto the ground where, after "a woman [gave] birth while watching the consecration ceremony, the wise men said the descendants of Thalun would all be kings."⁵⁵ While it is unclear if this was a direct result of the king's act of *abhiṣeka*, the connection is clear between the consecrated land, which the king and his descendants were being anointed heirs of and which was thereby transformed into Toungoo territory, and the woman's womb, from which a child was born. The anonymity of this woman, juxtaposed with the "334,569 kings from Mahasammata to Suddhodana" invoked at the beginning of U Kala's account,⁵⁶ hints at her establishment as the "great Earth" of Kyanzitha's inscriptions.

Buddha Lineages

Returning to the king's other duty as defender of Buddhism, the triadic composition of the gods emerging from Viṣṇu also begs the obvious comparison with the Buddhist triads found around Śrīkṣetra (Figure 12). These triads are carved onto what Luce called "megaliths"⁵⁷ — discussed earlier in the context of the autochthonous nature cults of Mus's monsoon Asia — dated as early as the 4th century. Although heavily abraded, they appear to depict the Buddha flanked by two devotees or disciples (nominally Sāriputta and Moggallāna), or possibly haloed monks with elongated earlobes. Two later pieces representing the First Sermon at the Deer Park are more suggestive, depicting the central Buddha with his hands in *dharmacakra-mudrā*, also flanked by monks, and with a multi-headed Brahmā on the lower tier, to the right of the lotus seat (Figures 13 & 14). It is significant that the central lotus seats in both cases are supported by the wheels symbolising the Teaching. To highlight Brahmā's place in the pedestal, the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*, which Frank Reynolds describes as the "'root text' from which the Theravāda notion of the Buddha lineage has developed,"⁵⁸ credits Brahmā for having convinced Buddha Vipassī to set

⁵⁴ BLAGDEN, "Môn Inscriptions," 117.

⁵⁵ TUN AUNG CHAIN, trans., *U Kala. The Great Chronicle*, 130.

⁵⁶ TUN AUNG CHAIN, trans., 123.

⁵⁷ LUCE, *Old Burma—Early Pagán*, 190–91. Luce even sees them as evidence of how "the single Bodhisattva cult is of early origin...in Buddhist Burma."

⁵⁸ REYNOLDS, "Rebirth Traditions and the Lineages of Gotama," 24–25.



Figure 12. "Megaliths" with Buddhist triads. 4th–6th century. Sandstone, each ca. 2 m in length. Kyauk Kar Thein monastery, Śrīkṣetra, Myanmar. All three are now in the Sri Ksetra Museum. Photograph by G. H. Luce, 1919–1958 © National Library of Australia, P516/12.



Figure 13. The First Sermon. 9th–11th century. Limestone, 27 x 21 x 10 cm. Found on top of Shwe-Naung-Pin-ridge, Śrīkṣetra, in 1930–40. Sri Ksetra Museum, 2013/1/60. Photograph by G. H. Luce, 1919–1958 © National Library of Australia, P516/47b.



Figure 14. The First Sermon. 9th–12th century. Limestone, ca. 40 x 19 x 9 cm. Śrīkṣetra. National Museum, Yangon. Photograph by G. H. Luce, 1919–1958 © National Library of Australia, P516/46.

the wheel of Law in motion. Vipassī was Śākyamuni's predecessor from ninety-one aeons ago who had initially been "inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the Dhamma."⁵⁹ In later Bagan-period examples at the Ananda temple, which was built by Kyanzitha, many stone steles with triadic compositions feature Brahmā shading the central seated Buddha with a parasol, affirming the continuing importance of his enabling role.⁶⁰

The *dharmacakka* with deer and Brahmā assemblage at the base of the lotus seat, which bears the teaching Buddha and his two disciples, can thus be seen as analogous to the recumbent Viṣṇu generating the Brahmā-Viṣṇu-Śiva triad. This is not to posit a one-to-one equivalence, of course, but merely to suggest that concerns with lineage underpin both ensembles. The great Dhamma — "profound, hard to see, hard to grasp, peaceful, excellent, beyond reasoning, subtle, to be apprehended by the wise"⁶¹ — is manifest in the particularised Dhamma taught to sentient beings by Vipassī, and thereafter by Śākyamuni, discourse which could be seen, grasped, reasoned with, and so on. While U Kala credits Anawratha (r. 1044–77), founder of the Bagan empire, with introducing orthodox Theravāda Buddhism to Myanmar,⁶² Luce gives that honour to Kyanzitha, who expresses his desire in inscriptions to "cleanse the religion of the Lord Buddha" together with "a Lord Mahāther" who is his "spiritual teacher."⁶³ An inscription at the Shwesandaw pagoda at Śrīkṣetra also declares that "the three holy Piṭakas, which had become obscured, (he) [Kyanzitha] proceeded to collect (and) purify."⁶⁴ While there are divergent accounts in the Burmese chronicles of the actual relationship between Anawratha and his successor Kyanzitha — the latter either shunned son or rebel general⁶⁵ — it is significant that the question of the transmission of the Thāton Theravāda lineage of monks haunts both kings in the consolidation of their empire.

Ideas about Buddha lineages circulated during the Pyu period at Śrīkṣetra, as attested by the well-known silver reliquary excavated from the Khin Ba

stūpa, sculpted with four seated Buddha figures in repoussé which are, importantly, inscribed with the names of the Buddhas of this era — Koṇāgamana, Kakusandha, Kassapa and Gotama.⁶⁶ Kyanzitha's inscriptions intertwine his extended biography with this lineage of the four Past Buddhas, not only identifying him as the sage Viṣṇu in the time of Śākyamuni, but also as a "wealthy man who...did pious deeds of divers kinds under the dispensation of the Lord Buddha Kassapa."⁶⁷ Interestingly, the Buddha lineage delineated in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* seems both linear and cyclical — while only one Buddha can exist at a time, each birth re-enacts a paradigmatic birth-sequence, where it "is the rule" that the Bodhisatta "descend from the Tusita heaven into his mother's womb" and also when he "issues from his mother's womb he issues forth stainless,"⁶⁸ and so on. The Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin under review seems to echo this recursion, Viṣṇu begetting Viṣṇu as the aeons march on. Indeed, the elimination of the sexual binary in this recursive iconographic production of Viṣṇu seems to mirror how the Buddha lineage is propagated by the mechanism of vows and predictions⁶⁹ exchanged by distinctly male interlocutors, with each new Buddha not even "stained" by his mother's womb.

Bodhisatta Dreaming

In examining the notion in Myanmar of the Buddha as Creator — of the Buddhadhamma, of past and future Buddhas — in other words, as one who delimits the absolutely unlimited, we must finally consider the 12th and 13th century temple murals in Bagan which illustrate the five dreams of the Bodhisatta the night before he attains Enlightenment. Descriptions of these dreams, found in the *Jātaka* stories, were transmitted to Burma and Thailand through Buddha biographies such as the *Paṭhamasambodhi* — not only in various textual versions, but also orally. To reproduce the description in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* V.196, quoted by Claudine Bautze-Picron in her article on the murals:

"While he was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, the great earth was his couch; Himalaya, king of mountains, was his pillow; his left hand lay in the Eastern Ocean, his right hand lay in the Western Ocean, his feet lay in the Southern

⁵⁹ *Dīgha Nikāya* 14.3.2–7; see WALSHE, trans., *Thus Have I Heard*, 213–15.

⁶⁰ See GALLOWAY, "Burmese Buddhist Imagery," figs. 171–174 & 230 for examples.

⁶¹ *Dīgha Nikāya* 14.3.1; see WALSHE, trans., *Thus Have I Heard*, 213.

⁶² See AUNG-THWIN, *The Mists of Rāmañña*, 1. Aung-Thwin's research, which remains contentious, traces the historiography of the biographies of Anawratha and Kyanzitha in order to undermine the historicity of what he calls the "Mon paradigm." See also STADTNER, "The Mon of Lower Burma."

⁶³ BLAGDEN, "Môn Inscriptions," 117. See LUCE, "The Career of Htilaing Min (Kyanzitha)."

⁶⁴ BLAGDEN, "Môn Inscriptions," 163.

⁶⁵ LUCE, "The Career of Htilaing Min (Kyanzitha)," 56.

⁶⁶ GUY, *Lost Kingdoms*, 80–82.

⁶⁷ BLAGDEN, "Môn Inscriptions," 138–39.

⁶⁸ *Dīgha Nikāya* 14.1.17–30; see WALSHE, trans., *Thus Have I Heard*, 203–5.

⁶⁹ In other words, the vows (*praṇidhāna*) to achieve Buddhahood taken by Śākyamuni in past lives, in the presence of the Buddhas Dipamkara and Kāśyapa who, in turn, make predictions (*vyākaraṇa*) that he will fulfil his aspiration. See ANĀLAYO, *Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal*, 55–93.



Figure 15. Mural located in west wing, north wall. 13th century. Pichard no. 585, Bagan, Myanmar. Photograph © École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Pierre Pichard, ref. EFEO_PICP04878.

Ocean. That was the first dream that appeared to him, and it foretold his discovery of the supreme full enlightenment...a creeper grew up out of his navel and stood touching the clouds. This was the second dream that appeared to him, and it foretold his discovery of the Noble Eightfold Path."⁷⁰

Murals on the walls of the Maung-yon-gu (monument 600) and monument 585 in Bagan, and in Yanzatthu (monument 92) in Salay, depict the Bodhisatta reclining on his right side in the cosmic waters, with a creeper from the first dream sprouting from his navel.⁷¹ In the depiction in monument 585, a large serpent is coiled around a mountain, possibly the Himalaya in the first dream, which supports the reclining Buddha (Figure 15). For Bautze-Picron,

⁷⁰ BAUTZE-PICRON, "The Presence," 419–20. The translation is from ÑĀNAMOLI, *The Life of the Buddha*, 22.

⁷¹ See BAUTZE-PICRON, "The Five Dreams," 344–50 (figs. 1, 2 & 5–7), for the depictions in Maung-yon-gu (monument 600) and monument 585 in Bagan, and Yanzatthu (monument 92) in Salay.

this clearly references not only the eternal sleep of the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, but also the Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin iconography, and therefore the way in which Kyanzittha "embodies simultaneously the Hindu god and the Buddha."⁷² Her explanation of the symbolism of cosmic waters and the creeper growing out of the Bodhisatta's navel, paralleling Brahmā on the lotus stems arising from Viṣṇu, resonates with Thompson's "male usurpation of the womb" which I applied earlier to the tri-stemmed Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin:

"The creeper is an image of the umbilical cord... [it] transforms its male bearer into the creator, into the mother, with the creation unfolding outside the womb...we may thus say that the future Buddha while dreaming that he is lying on the universal waters, becomes aware of his nature, which is to be *buddha* and to be unified with the earth. Whereas the waters also refer to the undifferentiate, to the subconscious, this awareness illustrates the first step of separation of the differentiate out of the subconscious."⁷³

The "great earth" (Pāli: *mahāpaṭhavi*) which served as the Bodhisatta's couch in his dreams recalls the "great earth" of Kyanzittha's Mon inscriptions, and finally the "grand Terre" which is "beyond Brahmā" that Thompson quotes in *Mus*. It is significant that the creeper signifies the conception of the specific teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path, just as the seated Viṣṇu flanked by Brahmā and Śiva arising from the recumbent Viṣṇu evokes the procreation of a particular lineage of kings reincarnated from the god.

Without further data coming to light, it is impossible to put forth any interpretation of the tri-stemmed Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin image more definitive than that it seems to illustrate a generative principle both linear and cyclical for royal sovereignty and Buddhist teachings, informed perhaps by the agricultural allegory of a "lord of the soil"⁷⁴ which was compelling enough to be appropriated by Kyanzittha in his rationalisation of Bagan kingship. In the Shwesandaw inscription, Kyanzittha claims that his mother was "born of the Vilva line, his father of the Solar race."⁷⁵ The *vilva* fruit from which Kyanzittha's mother was born is the fruit of Lakṣmī, held in the hands of many Pyu period Viṣṇu images found at Śrīkṣetra.⁷⁶ The Solar race is a clear reference to the Śākya clan of Siddhattha, calling to mind the Buddhist monks, notably at the Ajaṇṭa caves, who are known to have called themselves Śākyabhikṣus in claiming descent from Śāk-

⁷² BAUTZE-PICRON, "The Presence," 425–33. The quoted phrase is from page 433.

⁷³ BAUTZE-PICRON, 425–26.

⁷⁴ *Mus*, *India Seen from the East*, 24.

⁷⁵ BLAGDEN, "Môn Inscriptions," 167.

⁷⁶ RAY, *Brahmanical Gods in Burma*, 25.

yamuni.⁷⁷ In this way, Kyanzittha fused Pyu cadastral and Vaiṣṇavite with Buddhist genealogies in his royal person, an imaginative act echoed in the present reading of this Pyu image of procreation.

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